SF Ethnic Dance Festival warms up

Paulino Tamayo(center), dressed as an eagle, rehearses a traditional Filipino dance with the Likha Dance Company at the Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts for an upcoming performance in the SF Ethnic Dance Festival next month, in Oakland, CA Sunday May 12th, 2013.

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On a blistering afternoon in a well-worn Oakland rehearsal studio, four barefoot men in shorts and T-shirts brandish spears as they pursue a leaping Paulino Tamayo, who, in flight, barely touches the floor. The distinctive sound of a bamboo gamelan and a set of metallophones
propels the men through their pursuit of a sacred eagle.

The piece, the latest offering from Likha Pilipino Folk Ensemble, may make more sense when it is costumed, feathered, lit and deposited on the stage at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts this month as the entry from one of the 30 companies selected to perform in the main-stage offerings of the 35th annual San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival.

Everything about the company, founded in 1992 by Filipino immigrant choreographer Rudi Soriano, bespeaks a dedication that is the norm with festival entrants. Soriano's original intention was to educate the Filipino American community about its dance heritage, which he has researched extensively in his native land.

But the troupe has increasingly come to more fully occupy the interests of Soriano, who earns his living as a case manager at a local medical complex. The 23 dancers in the current company may not be paid, but says Soriano, "we dance like professionals."

The festival, which will spread over the city starting Friday, tells us more about the changing demographics in the Bay Area than any dry survey of race-based population shifts. A staggering 105 companies and soloists from around Northern California tried out for a spot on the bill during the open auditions last January. What was once of interest to a fragmented ethnic community has evolved into a professionally produced portrait of who we are.

Significantly, the cultural mosaic keeps growing; no fewer than one-third of this year's participants, performing everything from Bollywood to belly dance, are festival debutants. Each of the chosen troupes receives a stipend, but they must all defray the cost of their frequently elaborate costumes and the accompanying musicians.

What matters most to some observers of the festival is the amicable collision of all these companies in the lobby after the performance and, reports festival Co-Artistic Director CK Ladzekpo, in the backstage area.
"When you bring together a lot of cultures who do not know each other," says the veteran Ghanaian-born musician, "you get to experience each other's heritage, and there's a great feeling of admiration, respect and trust. If you are open to it, you go on a journey." To that end, Ladzekpo has pioneered unusual collaborations among festival participants, like last year's meeting of an American Indian soloist and a flamenco diva.

At 35, the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival has evolved into one of the area's most fertile artistic institutions. Not even a forced exodus a few years ago from the Palace of Fine Arts Theater and a relocation to the more intimate YBCA has blunted the ingenuity of the producing agency, World Arts West, which has launched a series of workshops, events and free outdoor concerts to complement the main-stage concerts. Those have become spiffy, streamlined affairs under Ladzekpo and colleague Carlos Carvajal. An exercise in multiculturalism has developed into a thrilling entertainment.

Under the guidance of artistic director Rudi Soriano, the Likha Dance Company rehearses a traditional Filipino dance at the Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts for an upcoming performance in the SF Ethnic Dance Festival next month, in Oakland, CA Sunday May 12th, 2013.

But has something been lost in all this success? Are today's ethnic company directors still concerned about reproducing their cultures' traditional dances with sufficient rigor? Are some of these groups more interested in diversion than diversity?
How much should context matter in world dance? Does an African war dance or a Peruvian wedding ensemble retain its authenticity when groomed and tweaked for a crowd preferring a good time over an ethnography lesson? Is there any place for innovation?

Specialists in the field debate these questions among themselves. In addition to performing and choreographing, Ladzekpo boasts academic credentials, as director of the University of California's African music programming. He will tell you without blinking that "ethnographers are very bad at staging dances. I call them dance arrangers."

But Ladzekpo notes, too, that "authenticity is a loaded word. Traditional dances from antiquity are not like pools of standing water. They change from generation to generation. If I take one dance from my people, the way my father took it from his father, you would be surprised at the results. The technique will be there, the rhythm will be there, but each generation takes what is important to express that generation's feeling about its culture."

Ladzekpo recalls his own experience in reconstructing "Atsiagbeko," a war dance of the Ewe people of West Africa. This originated as an all-day ritual, much dependent on repetition, rallying the people to combat. "If you go into a village, repetition is part of the form; it lends a kind of ascetic power. But," says the choreographer, "we are not at war, and if you repeat too much, audiences will be bored, so you find a way of avoiding it."

Thus, Ladzekpo speeded up the drum rhythm. He is realistic, too, about adapting to 21st century reality. "We had a bonfire in our village only because there was no electricity. Modern stage lighting is simply trying to copy that tradition."
Clockwise from far left: Paulino Tamayo (center), dressed as an eagle, and members of Likha Pilipino Folk Ensemble rehearse at Malonga Casquelord Center for the Arts in Oakland; women of the ensemble rehearse; Rudi Soriano, artistic director for the troupe; ensemble member Valerie Baula.

That brings us to what choreographers in the field call "proscenium culture," and it cannot be ignored. "How much incipient theatricality do I keep? What will be the relationship between musician and choreographer?" These are questions Ladzekpo asks himself. They are questions many choreographers should be confronting this month, as the festival dances exuberantly into its second generation. {sbox}


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